A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 42

Whirlwind's arrival on *Encounter* did not go unnoticed. Standing on the deck, his arms crossed, a scowl locked on his face, was Commander Voyan. With him, Alize, no less welcoming.

"And just where have you been these past three days, Komara?" Voyan asked. No *captain*. He was mad.

"Esera, do you have any idea how worried we've been?" asked Alize, just as cross with her.

And they're both right to be angry, Eserea thought. "I'm sorry," she said. "I needed to clear my head. I didn't think anyone would care I was gone."

Voyan let her know what he thought of that with an indignant and impolite word. "Of course we care! Even if it's only Alize and I, you owe it to us to at least *tell* us when you're going to vanish for an indeterminate time."

"Don't count out Mister Murshida, either," Alize added. "He's with Sanya right now, so he couldn't come down."

"I see," said Esera.

Strong Zygerrian hands wrapped around her shoulders. "You've been making us sick with worry, ever since Caramm," Alize said. "Hiding away in your cabin, disappearing... we thought you'd flown off and- well, it doesn't matter now. You're back safe."

"You and I need to have a serious talk," Voyan said. "And we will, once you meet the new crew."

Esera felt dazed. "New crew?"

"Yes, the ones who you signed over before you vanished," said Voyan. "They've been waiting to meet you. Don't bother explaining why you were gone, though I would like to know, myself."

"I can't tell you," Esera said. The matter of Sidious would never leave *Invisible Hand*'s observation tower. The matter of Master Dooku's holocron was less sensitive, but no one aboard this ship but Murshida would understand. *Are you a part of this universe, or are you sealed away in stagnant isolation?* Master Dooku had asked. Esera knew which she had been, lately.

"We're just happy you're home," said Alize. Her big arms wrapped Esera in a hug, a rare experience for her in recent years. Home. Happy. Two words that made Esera's eyes sting and her throat tighten.

"Thank you," she murmured, half-fearing and half-hoping she might sink into the abyss of warm, safe softness that was Alize.

"It's good to have you back, Captain," said Voyan. His words were as formal and stiff as they so often were, but Esera could feel a genuine relief in the Force from him. *Maybe he hasn't totally written me off,* she thought. "If you could come by the mess hall just before dinner, I'd appreciate it. I've got Buna under control, for now, but she's itching to test you."

"Right," said Esera. *Who's Buna?*

Esera showered and changed into her proper uniform. Briefly, she thought about wearing the trousers, but they just weren't her style for non-combat activities. She stuck with the long skirt, and went all out on looking like the woman of power she supposedly was. Without the Sith holocrons of Darth Tyranus, her cabin no longer felt so dark or oppressive. Only Master Dooku's holocron remained. The collected wisdom of a heretic against the Order. Wisdom Esera knew with every fiber of her being to be true. *The path of a true Jedi is the hardest path of all,* he'd said.

Between the dismantling of the Sith grand plan, becoming what a Jedi was supposed to be, and dealing with new people in her life, Esera expected her life to be as busy as it ever was.

New meat, how exciting, Sanya had thought, sitting with Zule and Alize in the mess hall. The reality had been less exciting. Voyan's new guys and girls were gathered around with each other, some stealing glances at the three women eyeing them up.

"How about that Neimoidian?" asked Sanya.

"Eh..." Alize wasn't enthused.

"He's not one of those high caste slimeballs," Sanya said. "Look, big shoulders, big hands, shorter legs. He's a working fellow, no doubt about it."

"Yeah, but he's got no hair, no ears," Alize whispered. "How can I tell what's on his mind if he doesn't have ears? Doesn't sit right with me." *Zygerrian peculiarity,* Sanya thought.

"And that person?" Sanya looked over to the Trodatome, a yellowish tube-like creature sitting on what looked like flippers. A close look would reveal fine hairs on parts of it. Two blue eyes squinted out over the room, mounted on short stalks.

"I don't even know what that is."

"That is a Trodatome," Sanya said. "No arms, but they have six *prehensile* antennae. Wild, huh?"

Alize grimaced. "I'll pass."

"What about *her?*" Sanya gave as minute a nod as possible to the Barabel. The heavy-set reptilian woman had deep sea-green scales and vivid red eyes, and she gazed out over the room with a predator's slit pupils. The nostrils on her stout snout opened and closed, her tail lazily moved about at her side, and sometimes a forked tongue darted out from between what passed for lips on her species. Being a reptilian, there was little to identify her as female, except for the less prominent bumps atop her skull.

"Scary," Alize said.

"Yeah, right? Barabels are crazy, I heard. Could be fun."

"You are such a pervert, Sanya," Zule sighed, covering her face with her hands.

"I want a man, honey," Alize told Sanya. "That's the only team I'm playing for. You see this ring?" She knocked the brass ring on her right hand on the metal table. "It means I'm on the hunt. Too bad Miha couldn't find a cute Zygerrian boy..."

Sanya had learned quite a bit about Zygerrians lately, thanks to Voyan's research. Zygerrian women were *aggressively* territorial. Never would Sanya have guessed that Alize had a mean bone in her body, but hormones and pheromones could do things to a person. Voyan had considered passing up the potential fourth new recruit; he wanted their often sweet, sometimes spicy, motherly cook staying just as she was. Unfortunately, the new recruit's credentials were just too good to let slip by.

She was a Cathar woman. "Now that's what I'm talking about," Sanya said in a low voice. Zule rolled her eyes, and Alize frowned. The Cathar's flat, dark nose, dark eyes, and fine tawny fur gave her a striking appearance, and she had a graceful leanness that put her in direct competition with Zule for most attractive person on the ship. Her wild golden mane looked like it took hours to comb.

"I don't like her," Alize said.

Exactly what Voyan feared, Sanya thought. "Relax, Alize, she's not Zygerrian."

"I look at her, and I don't like her," said Alize. The Zygerrian brain was not picky when it came to recognizing its own. The Cathar were close enough for Alize's competitive instincts to go off.

Before anything could happen, Voyan and Esera made their appearance. They looked quite the pair, in that midnight blue uniform. Real professional officers. Too bad Sanya knew what a goof-up Esera could be. But Sanya was a goof-up too. They still weren't on speaking terms.

"Captain on deck," Voyan announced. The Neimoidian and Cathar stood immediately, Zule moments after; the Trodatome was already standing. Only the Barabel stayed seated, besides the civilian contractors Alize and Sanya. Behind the Humans came Murshida, with his vibro-weapon, and the two magnaguards Esera seemed to have acquired.

"Good evening," Esera said, looking over the four new recruits. "I'm Captain Esera Komara, Confederate Naval Intelligence. Welcome aboard *Encounter*. I don't run the tightest ship in the fleet. Combat isn't our primary duty, though it's been known to happen... Usually when we least expect it."

"I'll say," Alize said under her breath. Esera's eyes darted their way, she'd heard that.

"That being said, I do run a *clean* ship. Follow my rules, behave yourselves, and do your jobs, and there won't be any problems. Step out of line, though, and we will have a problem. For instance, you." Esera pointed at the Barabel. "Stand up when I'm speaking to you."

The Barabel crossed her arms. "Or what?"

"Or I'll show you why I work directly for Grievous," Esera said.

The Barabel smiled, showing her fangs. "Heard you was a Jedi," she said, slowly standing up. "But you ain't look like any Jedis on the holovids. They're warriors, they are. You're a little girl in gold jewelry."

Barabels are *crazy,* thought Sanya. Or at least, this one was. She didn't actually know all that much about them. A part of Sanya feared Esera was going to stand there and take the insults, but another part of her feared Esera was going to be torn apart by this behemoth woman.

Esera gave the reptilian a flat stare, and then turned to the magnaguards. She took one's electrostaff and tossed it to the Barabel, who caught it one-handed. Esera shed her uniform jacket and handed that to Voyan. She took the remaining electrostaff. Standing there in that long skirt and white sweater, with her Raxian earrings and eye shadow, Esera did *not* look like a warrior in the slightest.

"Stand aside, everyone," Esera told them, turning her staff on. The Barabel answered in kind. They were given plenty of space to have it out in.

"One hell of a welcoming session," Sanya muttered to Alize. *Be careful, Esera...*

The Barabel lunged forward but Esera spun to the side, her skirt swirling. She hit the Barabel in the back, right in the spine, sending the hefty reptilian to her knees. Then Esera bashed the staff against the side of the Barabel's head, and she went sprawling on the floor. Without any further ceremony, Esera picked up the other staff and returned the weapons to the droids.

"Would anyone else like to challenge me?" asked Esera.

Good grief, Esera! Sanya thought. Grievous really had shaped the girl Sanya once knew into someone else.

The Neimoidian raised his hands, palms open. "Hell, Captain, I'm feeling better about this job already with you around." The Cathar woman looked impressed, but the Trodatome stood, head slightly tilted, like it didn't know what to make of what just happened.

The Barabel pushed herself to her knees, still smiling. "Jedi," she said. "Feddie man was right. Little girl in gold's a Jedi. I'll fight for you, Captain. Damn right, I will."

Esera was putting on her jacket. "Wonderful. Yes, I was with the Jedi Order. I went to war when I was fourteen years old. Let's say I had a change of heart a while back. Now I work for Grievous. I don't mean Grievous's underlings, I mean Grievous. I have a line straight to his commlink. You cross me, you cross Grievous. And no one crosses Grievous and gets away with it. Isn't that right?"

Everyone in the room nodded, some more enthusiastically than others.

"I'm young, I'm small, I *don't* look like a fighter. I *don't* like fighting. But I guarantee I'm better than any of you. Raise a hand to me or anyone under my protection, and you'll find out just how fast I can put you down. You understand?"

A chorus of *yes, Captain* answered.

"Good. Now, introductions. You've already met Lieu- um, Commander Miha Voyan." She wouldn't be Esera without at least one slip-up. "He's my chief engineer and first officer. He speaks with my authority. That means he indirectly speaks for Grievous. Bear that in mind if you want to challenge him." Voyan gave a start at that. "The Zeltron is Ensign Zule Xiss. She's a real piece of work." Under the table, Zule made a rude gesture towards Esera. "She used to be in the Jedi Order like me, but things happened. Tangle with her at your own risk. Behind me is Harak Murshida, our combat specialist and mystic. Want to know how to break someone's arm in ten different ways, he can tell you. Want to know if the universe has objective truth or not, he can tell you. Murshida could kill every single person in this room in thirty seconds, except me, because he's a trained fighter. But like me, he doesn't enjoy fighting. Don't start trouble and there won't be any trouble. We've got some civilians, too. Sanya is our hydroponics girl. Alize is our cook. Be nice to them if you want to eat. You'll soon meet my astromech droid, R8-M5. He's a good droid, and he'll do right by you if you do right by him. That's how we work on my ship. Now, who are you?"

The Neimoidian went first. "Lieutenant-Commander Gulan Durm," he said, saluting. "Five years in the Federation fleet, machine specialist. I can work on any droid in the fleet and half the engines, too. And I can fabricate just about any spare part you need, if I've got the supplies. Just don't trust me with a blaster, I'm no good in a gunfight."

The Cathar was second. "Lieutenant Oska Oto," she said. "Hyperdive engineer. Six years of private work, two years with with a Loyalist privateer. Jumped ship at Nar Shaddaa, found myself signing up with the Seps. Now I'm here. Unlike my compatriot, I've got no shortage of experience in gunfights." The words *hyperdrive engineer* sent a shiver down Voyan's back, Sanya could see.

"You're a turncoat?" Esera asked, immediately suspicious.

"No more than you, Captain. I'm just a woman making an honest, clean living," said Oto, staring dead ahead. That was gutsy, calling Esera out like that. But Esera kept her cool, and simply nodded. "And the truth is, my last captain had wandering hands, which I didn't take kindly to. I hope that won't be a problem here, Captain Komara."

"Absolutely not," said Esera.

Voyan introduced the Trodatome. "This is Ensign Klaud. He can't speak Basic, but he understands it very well. He *could* wear a translator box, but it's culturally taboo for his people to wear anything upon their bodies. Just watch the antennae and eyes, that'll tell you everything he wants you to know. He's an experienced mechanic and those antennae can match a computer's precision when it comes to detail work. Ensign Klaud here will be a huge help," Voyan told Esera.

"I see," said Esera, not looking convinced. "We're breaking uniform regulations already, commander?"

"This isn't that tight a ship, is it?" Voyan asked.

"Well, he's an ensign, so he won't be giving anyone orders." She turned to the Barabel. "You must be the Buna that the commander mentioned to me."

Finally, it was the Barabel's turn. "Yep, that's me, ol' Captain Buna. Been around a while, pirated outta every Wild Space port you can name. Dosuun, Pion, Yanibar, Terminus, all of 'em. Good times for pirates out there, but Hutts are movin' in. You pledge to a Hutt or you get marked. I ain't workin' for no slug. My first officer thought otherwise. All that's waitin' for me in Republic space is a *long* prison sentence... Figured I'd throw in with the rebels. I know half the damn captains in your fleet, Captain Jedi. Fought alongside some, fought against more!"

The two Trade Federation men said nothing, but Voyan and Durm both were tight-lipped. Federation men and pirates seldom mixed, Sanya knew that well. Esera raised the question Sanya was thinking:

"My chief engineer has no fondness for pirates. He wouldn't sign you up if he didn't have a reason, am I correct?"

Buna grinned. "Ain't every Hutt pirate *wantin'* to be a Hutt pirate, you know what I mean? I know 'em. They know me. Ol' Buna starts callin' friends from way back, tradin' favors, rememberin' debts. Young Captain Jedi gets the scoop on all the moves happenin' in Hutt Space. And on the side, young Captain Jedi fights with ol' Buna at her back."

"What's *your* angle, Buna?" Esera asked.

"We Barabels know the stories. Fightin' with a Jedi, that ain't no small glory. Always wanted to, before I died." Buna shrugged. "No one got anywhere by not takin' chances."

Esera turned to her chief engineer. "Voyan, have you been going around telling everyone I'm a Jedi?"

"Buna's the only one I told before they came aboard," he said. "She's a dangerous woman, one of the most dangerous, back in the day, but our interests all align here. Telling her you were a Jedi is what hooked her in." The Barabel beamed with pride. Sanya supposed any pirate would feel that way, being called the *most dangerous* by the minions of the mighty Trade Federation.

"All friends here, ain't we?" Buna asked. "Hate the Hutts, hate the Republic, love freedom, simple as."

"Simple as," agreed Esera. "You were a captain of a ship, Buna?"

"Sure was," she said. "Still am. Call it a temporary loss. Little Feddie man said this ship ain't big enough for two captains. And you ain't gettin' me in any uniform. Says I can call myself a *civilian contractor.* Captain Buna ain't got a ship right now, she'll fly with Captain Jedi for a bit."

"Welcome aboard, then," said Esera. Just then, R8 arrived, the little green and white astromech wheeled into the room and beeped. "Oh, here's R8. Now, we'll be spending a few days in orbit so you can get accustomed to this ship. We will then depart for Emberlene. It's right on the frontier of Confederate and Republic territory, combat will be likely, so do your best to figure this ship out. Now, Voyan, you can show Buna and Klaud to their quarters. Durm, Oto, R8 will take your measurements for uniforms. Please cooperate."

The two nodded, and Voyan walked the big reptilian and Trodatome out. Sanya noted the blaster pistol on his hip. He wasn't trusting the pirate all the way. Once they were gone, Esera looked over them all. "I don't know how many of you know Barabels. *Never* show weakness to her. That means no apologies, *ever*. If you get her mad, stand your ground, no matter what. She'll be testing you. That's how you earn respect with her people."

This ship just got a whole lot more fun, thought Sanya.

The Jedi Council had done its utmost to prevent word of Aspar's arrest from reaching the rest of the Temple. They'd wanted the situation as low-profile as they could get, after the media circus that had been Ahsoka Tano's trial and the fallout of Barris Offee's betrayal. *But the Force had other plans,* thought Shaak Ti, looking at the open door of the holding cell Aspar had been in.

"Do we have a list of suspects who might have broken him out?" Mace Windu asked Cin Drallig.

"I don't need a list, I already know," Drallig said.

"Gion Caraf," said Obi-wan.

Drallig nodded. "You know him too, I see. It's his access code that opened this door. They walked right out the main gate last night. They could be anywhere on Coruscant by now."

Mace Windu shook his head. "Even the Temple Guard is compromised..."

"Compromised? You make it sound like this is something more than two young Jedi going rogue," said Drallig. When no one said anything, his expression grew tense. He lowered his voice. "Is this something more?"

"It's possible," Shaak Ti told him. "Aspar told us there were more Jedi in this temple who agreed with his ways than we knew. But no one expected the Guard to hold such Jedi..."

"I should have," Obi-wan said, stroking his beard. "I knew Aspar and Caraf were close. They came to the Temple in the same year, Aspar said. But I never thought one of the Temple Guard would have his faith so shaken as to think Aspar was right about anything..."

"This rot goes far deeper than we thought," Mace Windu said.

"I can have the Guard start investigating, asking questions. I can have a list of Jedi we can't rely on in a matter of days." Drallig looked sickened by the words coming out of his mouth, but they came. "Masters, if this is as big as you think it is, we need to act, *now*. Otherwise, the Council might find itself in a situation it hasn't known since the Sith Wars."

"Let's not be hasty," said Obi-wan, disturbed at the trajectory he must have been seeing.

Shaak Ti wasn't surprised by any of this. Months ago, she'd come to the conclusion the Jedi Order had strayed from its path, so badly that the Force itself was acting against them, through none other than Grievous. Grievous had been trained by Dooku in lightsabers and perhaps more, Grievous's new ally, Komara, had been trained by Olor Callo, who himself had learned from Dooku. There were no coincidences in the Force. And while the Force could not counteract free will, it could move those willing to be moved. The Force had as many ways to correct itself as it had lifeforms to call upon. Grievous was but one of countless beings who had set out on a path he was called to. How many had failed to reach that path, where Grievous now trod? Neither Shaak Ti nor anyone else could ever know. What mattered was that Grievous was the one that had made it this far. Perhaps he was replacing another, perhaps he himself would fail and be replaced. But the Force was behind something greater at work. What could stop it?

"We will not let the Order be split again," Mace Windu said. "Master Drallig, start your list. Bring it to us as soon as you can."

"I'll get right on it."

Obi-wan pulled Shaak Ti aside a little while later. "I'm reconsidering what you said to me, all those months ago."

"I'd say I'm glad, but there's nothing to be glad about right now," Shaak Ti sighed. "I don't like the future I see, Obi-wan. But I do not for a second believe there's anything we can do to avoid it."

"After Agamar, I understood what you were trying to say. We are supposed to be the guardians of justice and peace in the Republic. And look what's happened out there."

Shaak Ti took a deep breath, and tried to shake the feeling she was being watched. "The Jedi Order has failed in its mission. We have failed to uphold justice, we have failed to uphold peace. And the Force has sent Grievous to clean the slate."

"I still don't believe that," said Obi-wan. "From a certain point of view, it sounds like you're saying we're being punished for our sins with that insane cyborg. That's barbarism, to think like that."

"Dooku used to talk about the Force being life and death in one. He called it self-correcting. Those words have always stuck with me. If what I think is happening, is happening, then this isn't punishment. It's pruning. And whatever comes after will also be the will of the Force."

"You think the Force is aware enough to have a will?"

"I don't think that's the issue at hand, Obi-wan. I think the Force realizes it's out of balance, maybe consciously, maybe the same way even a bacteria can 'know' when its biochemistry needs adjusting. And I think to correct that balance, the Jedi Order isn't going to be around much longer. Not as we know it." They were silent for a few moments, and Shaak Ti decided to confess the feeling she'd had the other day. "When you wanted to call Aspar in for more questioning, I had a terrible feeling. A premonition, almost. And now look what's happened. We're staring down a possible schism. Wasn't this unthinkable, just a short while ago? Before Krell, before Barris, before Komara, before Aspar?"

"I hate that you're making sense," said Obi-wan. "What are you suggesting we do?"

There's nothing we can do, that's what she almost said. But Shaak Ti knew that despair only begot despair. So she went straight to the heart of the problem: "We quit the war, Obi-wan."

Obi-wan raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"We quit the war. We put away our lightsabers and walk away. In fact, I think we should quit Coruscant, too. We need to retreat to somewhere less... cluttered. The only way the Order survives, I think, is if it withdraws and reorganizes. If we stay here in this temple, sending our young ones out to die or be radicalized into whatever Aspar and Komara are now, then we're as good as gone."

For a long time, Obi-wan was quiet. They looked out from the Temple windows, at the Coruscant skyline, and its gleaming towers and endless lanes of speeders. "Sanya would have agreed with that," he said, at last.

"The agri-corps girl?"

"The one I lost on Agamar. Who knows what awful things Grievous is doing to her. If she's even alive." There was guilt in him, Shaak Ti could feel that. "Shaak Ti, if you tell this to the Council, I will support you."

"Thank you, Obi-wan."

It came as no surprise that three of the four new hires were working in engineering. Voyan still didn't trust the drones for complex tasks. Or Zule. Lieutenant-commander Gulan Durm's presence alone cut expected work-hours in half. He could do things unsupervised that Zule Xiss wasn't allowed to do *with* supervision. Ensign Klaud didn't strike Esera as useful, but Voyan thought he would be. How much detail work would a ship as big as *Encounter* really need, though?

The women, though, Esera was less hopeful for. Oska Oto did not like Alize, Alize did not like her. There was an unspoken tension between them. Esera had never known Alize to dislike anyone, so she was worried. Buna was going to cause trouble, too. The big Barabel respected *Esera*, but everyone else on the ship hadn't earned it yet as far as she knew. People were going to get hurt. Hopefully only minorly. Barabels often assumed everyone was as resilient as they were. Esera was already fretting over Buna's inevitable showdown with her first officer, who wasn't known for his sturdiness. *Why* Voyan had brought these two aboard wasn't all that clear to her yet, and that's exactly why she called him to her cabin the next evening.

"This is a rare honor, Captain," said Voyan, dryly, as Esera beckoned him in. "Silence for three months, and suddenly, here I am."

"Sorry," muttered Esera.

"No, I should be apologizing," Voyan said, taking the seat offered. "Sometimes I forget you've been doing this since you were fourteen. That'd take a toll on anyone. I can't blame you, not after what the Jedi have done to you. If Zule is as bad as she is, you're probably even worse."

"Yeah..." For a few moments, Esera wasn't sure what to say. *I don't want to hear about Zule,* she wanted to say, trying to ignore that strange, forbidden ember of envy in her heart. *Isolation is stagnation,* she told herself, and forced herself to ask: "How is Zule Xiss doing?"

"She's getting better," said Voyan. "The Jedi screwed her up, the same as you. They *really* screwed her up. And the Jabiimis just broke what was already broken even more with their conditioning. It worked, mind you, Zule genuinely believes in their politics. It's endearing, in a twisted way, how sincere she is about it. But what do you get when you take a teenage Zeltron girl, teach her everything she naturally feels is wrong and shameful, and then try to brainwash her into becoming an assassin? You get Zule Xiss, that's what you get."

"How'd she get better?" asked Esera.

"Getting better, Captain," said Voyan. "*Getting*. Not gotten, not yet. Zule's got a mechanical mind. She likes taking things apart. She likes putting them back together even more. I guess I started noticing it as soon as she was on board, she was always very interested in the mechanics of how this ship operates. Having her contribute to that has done wonders for her. It's been a journey for both of us, I admit. I haven't been able to play unlicensed therapist without opening up a little myself, either."

"Yeah..." Esera's hand twitched as she let the implications settle in. Somehow, *Zule Xiss* had gotten to know Voyan better than Esera ever had. She didn't even know why the notion of that got her in such a bad mood. She forced those feelings away, this wasn't the time to deal with them. "Well, it's good to hear she's improving. It's certainly odd seeing her in uniform and talking about responsibilities, but I guess it's a sign of the progress you've made turning her into a functional, *almost* decent person."

Voyan laughed. He *laughed*. He never used to laugh, never. "You really don't like her, do you?"

"It's that obvious, huh?" Esera asked. She slumped down in her seat.

"She's got a complex about you too, you know," Voyan said. "But the grass isn't always greener on the other side."

"What's that mean?"

"Coruscantis..." Voyan sighed. "It means you both think the other has it better, because you don't know a damn thing about each other. Sanya at least-"

"Let's not talk about Sanya," Esera said. That betrayal still stung like it was yesterday. Quickly, she changed the topic to what she really wanted to discuss: "I want to know why you brought Oto and Buna aboard my ship. They're trouble, commander."

"Yes, they are," said Voyan. "Lieutenant Oto is a very smart woman, Captain. She knows a hell of a lot more about hyperdrives than I do. Ships this big are always supposed to have a hyperdrive engineer. Oto could have gone into a doctoral program if she hadn't gotten abducted, she has six years of study and research under her belt."

"By who?"

"Slavers. Her six years of *private* work were in slavery. Not necessarily doing hyperdrives, she implied."

"Let me guess: Zygerrian slavers."

"Yeah..." Now Voyan looked tired. "I trust in Oto's maturity. She knew Alize would be on the ship. She agreed to steer clear if she couldn't get over the fact Alize was Zygerrian, even if Alize is a working class divorced mother who never owned a slave in her life."

"But Alize doesn't like her either."

"It was a risk," said Voyan. "Alize's brain might recognize a Cathar as a Zygerrian. And now Alize subconsciously takes her as a rival."

"A rival for *what?*"

"For males. In most Zygerrian mammalian fauna, females do the pursuing. I don't know the reasons, I'm not a biologist," said Voyan. "But this goes straight to the top. Ask Alize *why* she left her home, sometime. She'll tell you."

"Noted," said Esera. "And Buna? Bringing a pirate, a *Barabel* pirate onto my ship?"

"We're intelligence, Captain," said Voyan. "We need contacts. She has them."

"You used to fight her kind."

"We had a long talk about it." Esera tried to imagine this reedy man less than ten centimeters taller than her talking with the ornery two meter wall of scales and muscle that was Buna. "Captain, something's afoot in Hutt Space. If we really are military intelligence, then I'm willing to deal with pirates if it means not being blind to what's going on in there."

"Fair enough," said Esera. "But you know she's going to get someone hurt."

"A lot more people will get hurt if we're caught blind."

That wasn't something Esera could dispute. She nodded. A silence went on a moment too long between them. And it was Voyan who broke it:

"We haven't spoken much since Caramm," he said. "I didn't think you'd take being called *dangerous* so hard."

Esera looked away. What was she supposed to say to that? That what really upset her was the closest thing she had to a friend considered her difficult to approach? That after all he'd said to her about not trusting others, especially aliens, *especially* Zeltrons, that he'd gone and gotten cozy with the first Zeltron girl to enter his life again? That she thought she'd found in him a kindred spirit, who'd faced horrible things most people would never understand, who knew how it felt to carry that burden, until Zule Xiss had whisked him away? The cynic in her said the Sanya affair should be a lesson to her: no one was her friend. But she also remembered what Master Dooku had said. Nothing was more susceptible to evil than a closed heart.

So, she told Voyan exactly what was bothering her. "I was afraid you were replacing me with Zule Xiss," she said, her face burning hotly at how childish that sounded. The engineer, *her* engineer, tilted his head.

"Replacing you?" he asked. "Like... a mutiny?"

"No, like... we used to talk. But now you've got Xiss to talk with. Among other things."

Voyan leaned back in his chair. "And all this time, I thought I'd offended you. And what do you mean, *among other things?*"

"You know..." Esera's face turned even more red. "She's a Zeltron..."

Another long few moments of silence passed, as Voyan stared at her, half amused, half incredulous. "Are you sure you're not a Zygerrian?" he asked. "I'm starting to think Tahnat didn't just mean your height or temper, when he compared you to his wife."

"What?"

"Talk to Alize about it," said Voyan. "Look, Captain, there's nothing improper between Zule and I. You want the truth? She's like the little sister I never had. Might have had, I should say." A dark look flashed across his face. "I'm not helping her because we're in bed together, or I even want to get in bed with her. I'm helping her because she needed it, and I could."

"That's a surprisingly noble thing to hear from you," said Esera. "I remember you telling me friendship was a waste of time. And that Zeltrons are a deceitful, cold-hearted people."

"I think Marko Riberre beat that out of me," Voyan said, his mouth twitching upwards. "He helped me see things clearly. And Zule isn't like other Zeltrons, she's the product of a completely different environment."

"Being wrong is a wonderful place to be," said Esera, before realizing he didn't know she'd heard him say that. "Uh, something my master used to say."

"Wise man," said Voyan, nodding. "I'm trying to turn my life around, Captain. I figured it's time to start putting some faith in others again. Maybe I'm a fool who's going to get hurt again, going against everything my life has taught me, but maybe I'm not. Zule would still be that sad, brooding troublemaker if I hadn't taken a chance with her."

Being able to look inward with honesty may be the most important skill a Jedi can have, Master Dooku had told her. Voyan had looked inward with honesty. Could she?

"Voyan, I need your help," Esera blurted out.

"You've got it," said Voyan.

"You don't even know what for."

"You're asking for it, Captain. You've got it." Voyan yawned. "But if you'd excuse me, I'd like to get some sleep. It's going to be a busy week."

"Of course," said Esera.

"When you want to talk, let me know. I'm not replacing you with Zule." Immediately, Esera's face went red again. *I can't believe I said something so dumb...* Voyan went on: "Oh, by the way, what *were* you doing down on Raxus? *Whirlwind*'s logs placed you in the middle of nowhere."

"Just clearing my head, commander," Esera said.

"Well, it worked. Something about you is different now."

"I'd say the same of you."

"We're both on a journey, I'd say. It's been a long one, and there's a long way yet to go." Voyan stood, and saluted. "Good night, Captain."

For the first few days, Buna the Barabel went out of her way to antagonize the rest of the ship, just as Sanya had expected. And Esera too. Voyan's choice in hires had proven wise, though, and all returned fire in their unique ways. After being shoved, Ensign Klaud had made a horrible screech and then vomited up a stinking slime all over Buna, who had since kept her distance. Lieutenant-commander Durm had headbutted her, he'd ended up in the medbay, but Buna's mockery of his Trade Federation service and his species never became anything more than jest afterwards. Lieutenant Oto had skipped to the proverbial chase and challenged Buna to a duel with metal poles they'd found, before Buna had even accosted her. Oto had taken the worst of it, but Buna said she'd had a warrior's heart.

Alize had smashed a pot down on Buna's hand when she tried to filch from the meat locker. "You steal from my kitchen and you'll never eat a piece of meat again on this ship," Alize said, waving her pot at the Barabel. Buna had hissed, but she'd backed down.

"Nice job," Sanya told Alize.

"She's pushing us, alright," Alize said. "But I know her type. It's not just Barabels that are like that. I've known proud, proud people, so proud that even seeing subservience in *others* makes them sick. People who can't stand yes-men and cowards and the like. Push back, show your mettle, even if you're scared to death, and you might just get a friend for life."

For Zule, Buna taunted her about the Zeltron culture she wasn't actually a part of. Zule resented being called a loose woman, even though that was a compliment among her people, and hit the Barabel with her robotic arm. That'd left a bruise under the scales, but Zule ended up with four more bruises than her opponent. She'd taken the worst beating of anyone, and taken it the most personally, too. But Buna made no more comments after that.

"Lots of shame in that one," Buna said to Voyan afterwards, as they lingered in the mess hall after dinner.

"The Jedi are very repressive," said Voyan. "Being a Zeltron and being a Jedi are two opposed ways of life. Zule can't reconcile what she was taught with what she is. But I'm trying."

"She should be proud of who she is." Buna crossed her arms and glowered at nothing. "Seein' that girl upset over what's in her blood, disgusts me, it does. Shame is poison for the soul."

"Humanoids have their values shaped early in life. I don't know how much Zule will be able to undo. Or Komara, for that matter. Sanya here is lucky, the Service Corps let her grow up like a normal girl."

"More or less," said Sanya. She put her plate in the dish-washing machine, a luxury unheard of at the Temple. Buna's eye was on her, she knew that, but her test did not come that night.

Murshida was the only one who triumphed, besides Esera. When Buna tried to pull a stunt on him, he simply picked her up and threw her. "Do not test me, reptilian," Murshida told her. "You will not find me weak."

"Evidently," groaned Buna, pulling herself out of a pile of fallen crates. "You're sharp, old Skakoan. Dangerous! I like that." *Old* and *ol'* were two different words in Buna's vocabulary, Sanya realized. One was a boast for the self, as Barabels grew only stronger and bigger as they got older. The other was a title of esteemed respect for one's elders. Soon after that, Buna and Murshida were practicing vibro-weapon martial arts together.

Sanya and Voyan were the only ones yet to be tested. The tension was getting to Sanya, but she knew it was coming. Buna always had her eye on her. Sanya was working in hydroponics alone when she heard heavy footsteps on the deck. "Well, come on, get it over with," Sanya said, swallowing her fear. That was a *big* creature, in front of her. Buna had more than half a meter in height on her, and probably a hundred kilos or more in weight.

"Been impressed by this crew so far," said Buna. "That fat Zygerrian civvie, she ain't a fighter, but she ain't a pushover. Are you?"

"Nope," said Sanya, even as her hands began to tremble. "Now get out of here, I have work to do."

"And if I don't?" Buna smiled.

"I'll- I'll make you leave."

Buna made that hissing sound again, a little higher in pitch. She was laughing at her. "You? You're tiny."

Now or never, Sanya! "Yeah?" she squeaked, despite her best efforts to keep her voice level. "Watch this!"

Sanya let her fist swing loose, right into the middle of Buna's chest. Her fist hit solid scale, sending a jolt up her arm. Buna didn't even budge a millimeter. She looked down, lips peeled back in a horrifying smile full of vicious teeth. And then a big reptilian hand swatted her down.

Later, Sanya woke up in the medbay. Buna was there, leaning against the wall; she must have brought her in. "You was scared, little Devaronian," she said. "Shakin' like a leaf."

"Yeah, I was," said Sanya. The ship's medical droid gave her a check-over. Her head hurt like hell.

"Bein' scared is the only time you can have courage," Buna said, as serious as death. "You fight for your plants, little Devaronian. You fight."

Sanya was left feeling very strange, but relieved. Her trial was over.

At dinner that night, the only meal she attended, as Barabels ate only once a day, Buna made her announcement to Esera. "Good crew, Captain Jedi," she said. "Reliable crew. Strong hearts. They all got my approval."

What about Voyan? Sanya wondered.

"And it only took a few busted heads," said Esera, wolfing down Alize's slightly-too-spicy curried nerf meat and Zygerrian rice. "You better be done with *testing,* Buna. These are my people, under my protection."

"I ain't raisin' a hand to them again 'til they raise a hand to me. Swear on my ma's pyre, Captain Jedi." A deadly oath, among Barabels, Sanya had learned. An oath on one's parents was an oath one fulfilled or died trying. "Besides, I was goin' light on 'em. Ask Feddie man. He got the real deal."

"Voyan?" Sanya asked. "You didn't do anything to him!"

"I sure did. Seven years ago. You remember that, Feddie man? *Karkosa?*"

Now everyone was silent. Voyan nodded.

"I never forget a face. Never. Imagine ol' Buna's surprise when she saw the little Feddie from *Karkosa* down in Raxulon! You see, we thought the reactors was out. Them bridge Neimoidians, they rolled over, fast and easy. We was gonna space 'em, but the power comes back on!" Buna looked over at Voyan. "We go down to engineering, and we find little Feddie man there, all alone. He'd rigged up a comms board down there and sent out a distress signal. Feddie man sees ol' Buna and her pirates, turns as white as snow, he pulls his blaster on us, screaming like death, but ain't nothin' happenin'. Feddie man's so scared, you see, he forgot to turn the safety off!" Buna made her hissing laughter. "More guts than any of 'em bridge Neimoidians. We spaced 'em, and let Feddie man live. Let all the little Feddies live, once they stop shootin' and we take their cargo. Big Feddies only like bridge Neimoidians. Feddie man there," she pointed to Voyan, "no, no. Deck Neimoidian there," she pointed to Durm, "no, no. Little Feddies get no respect from their own. We pirates gotta give 'em it. No brave little Feddies, no brave freighters for ol' Buna and her pirates. That's life." Having told her story, Buna dug back into her hunk of meat, without a care in the galaxy.

Durm and Voyan were particularly silent among the crew. They exchanged a look, saying what, only they knew for sure. But Sanya could guess. The Republic was the enemy today, they would keep the peace with the pirate.

"You've never mentioned this, Voyan," said Esera.

"I have, Captain. Radiation leaks and plasma fires." he said. Then he too went right on eating his dinner.

Esera didn't let him go that easily. "You said you'd never fired a blaster since you joined the Trade Federation, when we were on Zygerria."

"It's true. On *Karkosa*, I didn't get one shot off because I forgot the safety was on," said Voyan. "Right, Captain Buna?"

"Right!" agreed Buna, her mouth full of meat.

Esera looked troubled, deeply troubled. Durm was the one to speak next.

"Well, from a deck Neimoidian and former little Feddie, I appreciate not being spaced with those high caste sleazeballs who are running our civilization into the ground. Big Feddies can go to hell," he said, raising his cup to Buna. She raised hers back.

"Captain," Oto asked, speaking up for the first time that meal. She used her utensils with utmost properness, sitting with her back straight in her chair. "What were you doing on Zygerria?"

"Freeing slaves and overthrowing tyrants," Esera told her. Sanya didn't need Force powers to see that the opinion of Esera in the eyes of Oto and Buna alike had just gone up significantly. Alize, though, stayed completely silent.

Almost a happy ship, thought Sanya, sipping her fruit juice that came from a carton mysteriously labeled 'liquid assets.' *Almost.*

The clock read 03:32 when Tarkin was woken up by his commlink beeping. "Tarkin here," he groaned, hitting the button for the lights. One of the quirks of being the most powerful man in the Galaxy was being woken up at ghastly hours. Rest was optional, for the Supreme Chancellor.

"There's two people here to see you, my lord," said a clone trooper. One of the shock troopers who guarded his residence, Tarkin assumed.

"At *this* hour? Who are they?"

"They're Jedi. They say they need to see you, urgently. It could decide the fate of the Jedi Order."

He's been mind-tricked, Tarkin thought. "I'll speak to them on viewscreen," he said, putting on his robe and going to the screen on the wall. Two figures appeared on it, flanked by the clones. One was bandaged across his entire face, but for his eyes and mouth. The other was an alien, a near-Human at least, with creased grey skin and red markings. One of the Utapau aliens, probably.

"Thank you for talking to us, Chancellor," said the bandaged one. "I am Ardabur Aspar. This is Gion Caraf. Until a few hours ago, we were knights of the Jedi Order."

"Finally had enough of those dusty, moralizing old fools?" Tarkin asked, keeping his sneer off his face for the moment.

"Yes, Chancellor," said Aspar.

That caught Tarkin off-guard. He frowned. "I wasn't aware any of you could see that clearly."

"I worked with Admiral Holt to subjugate a Separatist stronghold. We agreed on extreme measures to bring the rebels to heel. The Jedi Council has decided, belatedly, it does not." Even through the bandages, it was obvious Aspar was annoyed. *Admiral Holt?* Tarkin knew him. Not terribly well, but well enough to know Holt was a man he found bearable. Sheev Palpatine had liked him enough.

"And so, you came to me," Tarkin said.

"Yes, we did." Aspar look to the alien, who now spoke.

"We cannot stand by idly any longer, my lord," he said, in a soft a voice. "The time has come to choose, between the Republic and the Jedi. We are choosing the Republic. And we know there are many more who would follow us."

The light in Tarkin's mind went on, and suddenly, he was completely awake. "Why don't you two come up here? We'll discuss this over tea." Minutes later, under clone guard, Aspar and Caraf were in Tarkin's apartment's living room, looking out of place in their archaic Jedi robes, among the utilitarian and modern fittings. A droid brought tea out, with milk and sugar, though in the typical Jedi austerity they took neither.

"I must admit, I didn't think getting to talk to you face-to-face would be so easy, my lord," Aspar said. "Well, almost face-to-face." He brought a hand to his bandages.

Tarkin let a corner of his mouth twitch up. These men were mind-readers, there was no point in putting on his sabacc face. "You're presenting me with an opportunity I can't afford to let slip by. The Jedi Council and the Senate are my two greatest obstacles in bringing this war to an end. Besides the abominable droid, Grievous, of course. If I can de-fang the Council, the war will end just that much quicker."

"Our thoughts as well," said Gion Caraf. "This war has only lasted as long as it has because the Council refuses to take the necessary actions. I have seen nearly four years of this war destroy my generation of Jedi. Barris Offee was my breaking point. If even a girl as strong as her couldn't handle this, then this war will be the end of us."

Aspar took over. "Our allegiance is to the Republic, Chancellor. To democracy. Not to an unaccountable, unelected oligarchy of out-of-touch elders. Gion and I have decided that to serve the Republic best, we must place ourselves directly in command of the Republic. Not the Council. So, we have come to you."

"How many more of you think this way?" asked Tarkin.

"Dozens, at least. Hundreds, if you count everyone on deployment right now. It's hard to know, with so many so far away," Aspar said.

Even a dozen Jedi was nothing to take lightly. They could do so much what others could not even dream of. To have Jedi in his pocket... Jedi who thought like Anakin Skywalker had, who weren't burdened by their ancient and foolish code... Tarkin liked that idea.

"Gentlemen, I have an offer for you," he said. "Renounce your allegiance to the Order. Swear loyalty to the Republic, the Constitution, and the Supreme Chancellor." *Not* the Senate, he'd left that out very much deliberately. "You will answer to me directly. And if you can bring more like you to our side, then perhaps we can begin a new Order. The Knights of the Republic, perhaps."

"My lord, that is precisely what I was hoping to hear," said Aspar, smiling. That was a cold look in those eyes. Tarkin recognized it. He saw it in the mirror every morning. *Yes, I think I can work with this man,* he thought.

"Are either of you shy around cameras?" asked Tarkin.

The reports coming in from Republic shipyards didn't make sense to Grievous. Four fifths of all *Arquitens* light cruisers under construction were being scrapped on the ways. It *was* an intelligent call, those ships were useless for anything but courier duty, in Grievous's mind. The question was, what would Tarkin replace them with? He'd been painstakingly rebuilding the Republic's logistics capabilities ever since he got into office.

Another ill-tiding had come to his desk, too. The open skies of Raxus *had* done Komara good, it seemed, because she was sending in intelligence reports as usual again. The latest one was disturbing.

Pirate contact indicates large-scale gathering in Hutt Space. Hutts are bringing in every pirate and mercenary they can get their hands on, sometimes by force.

Grievous read the message over. Two sentences, only, but foreboding ones. The Confederacy would not find it difficult to fight an attack out of Hutt Space. The Loyalists had been striking from Hutt Space in every direction since the negotiated that wretched treaty Dooku insisted on abiding by. However, if the Hutts joined the Loyalists, that would be a problem.

The Hutts were no warriors, Grievous knew that. They never did any dirty work themselves. They were lazy, greedy cowards, more like Nute Gunray than anything else. It was their hirelings that had him concerned. The Hutts were drawing on the same pirate crowd that commanded many Confederate ships. They were experienced and clever. Grievous did not want pirate experience aimed at him for once. *How can we foil any attempt by the Hutts to enter the war?* Grievous wondered.

He called up an expert he knew.

"Crab-man," Grievous said to the hologram before him, "what do you know of the Hutt's empire?"

"I grew up there, sir," said Kronaak. "It's not an empire."

"What is it, then?"

"Hutt space is..." Kronaak trailed off, clicking his claws and looking at the ceiling. "Like a basket of Sluissi hatchlings. They all crawl over each other without a care, but they all recognize the authority of the mother... or the Hutts, in this case. The only thing that makes Hutt space the Hutts' space is that those within it pay tribute to them, or else they fall outside the protection of the Hutts, and are preyed on by those with their protection."

"Why hasn't the Republic invaded them yet? Or us?"

"The Republic was too weak before the war to do so. And now, if either side committed the resources needed to defeat the Hutts and their tributaries, it would leave them vulnerable to an attack by the other. So it is said." Kronaak clasped his claws together. "I have dreamed of an invasion of Hutt space. I was born a slave under their rule, General, I know what hardships the common people suffer there. I even drew up operation plans and occupation strategies. But we could never do it without some kind of ceasefire with the Republic..."

Crab-man was a slave? This was quite the revelation. Wasn't it? Grievous wasn't sure if he'd heard that before or not. His earliest memory was seeing his village be taken away in chains by the Huk... There were few things Grievous despised more than slavers. The idea of liberating Hutt space had an allure to it that he could hardly resist.

"...or so I thought," Kronaak went on.

Grievous tilted his head. "Have you found a secret army?" he asked.

"Yes."

For a moment, Grievous wasn't sure if he was being rused or not. He narrowed his eyes. "Tell me more."

"The Hutts are pirates, slavers, parasites. They cannot fight a conventional war. They cannot fight a counter-insurgency. All they and their minions can do is raid, rape, and loot." Kronaak clicked his claws, and shook his head. "There are billions of downtrodden in Hutt space, clinging to the hope that they might one day have something more. They join gangs and mercenary outfits, they work for Hutts and other criminals, trying to backstab and betray their way to the top. But what if there was another way to freedom?"

"Are you saying we should fund a revolution?" asked Grievous.

"More than that. We should *start* one." Kronaak's jaws spread apart in an awful imitation of a smile. "I could do it with a single fleet, sir. I know the power structures, I know the people. Those on the top will cling to power, but for every one of them, there's a hundred more like me who once dreamed of something more. We will break every chain, we will tear down every tyrant, we will seize the future they have denied us for so long! Give me what I need, General, and I will annihilate the Hutts, once and for all!"

The confidence, the courage, the conviction! *This is true spirit,* he thought. *This is what wins wars.* Grievous found himself leaning forward and nodding. "Yes," he said, "yes! What do you need, Kronaak?"

"Transports, guns, and money, sir," said Kronaak.

"I've got two out of those three. We're always short on ships, though." An idea suddenly sprang into Grievous's mind. A devious idea. He would have smirked, had he a mouth still. "Kronaak, I'm assigning two support ships to your division, as well as several companies of droid marines. These are the last known whereabouts of Captain Hatha and *Cataclysm.* Go find him, he will help you take the transports you need from the Republic."

Kronaak's jaws spread again. "Gladly, sir."

In retrospect, Voyan's behavior on Zygerria now made complete sense to Esera. That really had been his first battle. He'd *tried* to fight on *Karkosa,* and failed at it so hard that Esera was surprised *she* wasn't the subject of that story. Failures of that magnitude seemed to be reserved for her in the Galaxy's history. No wonder he'd been so jittery about combat, that day. *He's really, really good at hiding things,* thought Esera.

But Voyan could be dealt with later. Right now Esera wanted to check in on Alize. One of the three people on the ship who truly, genuinely cared about her. One of two who could relate to her. And the only other woman aboard Esera felt even somewhat comfortable around. For once, she was the one ringing a cabin door.

"Come in," said Alize.

"Hey," said Esera.

"Oh, hello Esera," the big Zygerrian said, welcoming her in. Never before had Esera seen Alize's cabin. It was around ten degrees hotter than the rest of the ship, the lights were filtered into a warm yellow-orange color, and Alize had found plenty of furnishings in their travels. Most of it was from Minntooine's primary space station, though. "Please, sit. How can I help you?"

"I just want to make sure you're okay," said Esera. They sat on the couch together.

"My dear, that's usually what I want to ask you," Alize said, smiling and patting her knee.

"Thank you, Alize. Oto's not giving you any trouble, is she?"

"No, no, she doesn't speak to me. I saw the manacle scars on her wrists. I understand. But something about her rubs me the wrong way." Alize wasn't smiling now, her eyes were narrowed, and her claws pricked on the armrest on her side of the couch. There were lots of claw marks there.

"Voyan says you're competitive. Zygerrian women in general, I mean."

"That's one word for it. She does look a bit like one of us, doesn't she?"

"He thinks Necho Tahnat compared me to his wife for reasons beyond my, um, lack of height," said Esera.

"There's a lot of Zygerrian in you, honey," said Alize. "Miha thinks it's your Stalimurian blood. On both our planets, us women are expected to wrangle the men around. And since Zygerrian and Human men are *usually* bigger and stronger, we need to make up for it in personality."

I'll say, thought Esera. Plump little Maira could dominate her brother Toren and her husband Harin alike through sheer force of will. But how much of that was the cultural expectation that Maira *ought* to be listened to, and how much of it was actually Toren and Harin being psychologically overwhelmed by Maira? *I could probably answer that, if I'd grown up there,* thought Esera. She'd only been there a few days, but she did miss her sister, and her brother, and her niece and nephew. And Harin was easy on the eyes, at least.

"Thinking of home?" Alize asked.

"Yeah," said Esera.

"I think about home a lot, too." Something about those words made Esera turn to Alize. She looked weary, and there was a longing in her eyes. It was the first time she'd seen such feelings on that usually jovial face. "We're competitive, you said. Competitive is an understatement, Esera. Zygerrian women know the only men we can truly rely on are our sons. I suppose it isn't the men's fault, they were born to spread their genes as much as they can. But it's not us women's fault we want our men to stick around and help support the children, is it?" Esera shook her head. "It's the woman's responsibility to keep her man. I see Oto, and I guess she looks too close to one of us. I get defensive, suspicious. Like she's planning to take something from me. Something I don't even have right now. Because I couldn't keep my man, back on Zygerria."

"He's the one who was unfaithful, though, why is is it your fault?"

"That's our culture, Esera. Don't try to argue it, you're not one of us, you'll never truly understand. The unfair part is what comes after. It could happen to any of them, if they're not careful, but they mock, they laugh, they gossip... Reputation means everything, on my planet. Mine was gone. Thank goodness my children were all grown up by then."

"Ah..." Esera wasn't quite sure how to respond to that, but there was more to this story. "You got pretty uncomfortable looking when I mentioned our part in getting rid of the king."

"Working in the palace kitchens was the only job I'd ever had. I loved every day of it, even the bad days left me with some good memories," said Alize. She offered Esera an apologetic and sad smile. "No king, no palace, no kitchens. No husband, no reputation. My eldest son, bless his heart, would have taken me in, he had the means to. But then no girl would ever court a boy who still lived with his mother. The best thing I could do for him was to leave, so I did. Now here I am, forty-four years old, starting my life over from the very beginning." For a moment, Alize's facade broke, and she sounded just as lonely and lost as Esera felt on her worst days. "And tonight, I learned I have you of all people to thank for it. Don't second guess what you did for my race, slavery had to go. But I really do wish you'd tell me these things, Esera."

Yeah, I messed up, thought Esera, her heart dropping into her stomach and then down through the deck. *Oh, what a night it's been for sudden revelations...* "I'm sorry, Alize," Esera managed to say. "I... I just never thought about it. So much of what I do is secret, things I can't tell anyone, so I don't really say anything at all, and these are all just excuses, aren't they? I'm sorry. I really am."

"I know you are," said Alize, holding her hand. "I know you don't mean harm. I know you're no older than one of my children and you've never had anyone to help you learn what it means to be a good woman."

I did, though, Esera thought. But not for long enough. Not nearly long enough. There was a sudden lump in her throat, and a wetness in her eyes. And perhaps Zygerrians had a bit of Zeltron empathy in them, because Alize pulled her into the hug they both needed right then. She felt so small, in Alize's arms. Small and safe, even if Esera was the most dangerous woman on *Encounter*. Lirka and Sirka had hugged Esera before, but not like this. This was a closeness she hadn't felt since Master Callo died.

"It's not fair, Esera, any of it," said Alize, in a quiet voice. "One day, everything's fine, and the next, your world is upside down, and things will never be the same again. You can do everything right and still end up nowhere good. That's life, honey. Nothing we can do about it. But there's nothing saying you need to go at it alone, either, okay?"

"Okay," said Esera. She stayed there for a while with Alize, feeling like a leech sucking out every bit of warmth in the Zygerrian. A part of Esera said she should have fled the room, retreating into Jedi solitude and detachment, that Alize was dangerous because she was a source of affection that would lead Esera down the dark path. But she remembered what Master Dooku said. Self-mastery wasn't attained by hiding from one's self. So, she listened to that other part of herself, the part that was hurt and lonely and scared and would have given anything to go back to that time in her life when she had someone she could trust unconditionally.

Things will never be the same again, Alize said. Master Callo would have agreed. *You can't go home again,* he'd liked to say. Master Callo was dead. But Alize wasn't. Voyan wasn't either. *I lost my master,* Esera thought, *but now I've got two people reaching out to me. I* am *scared, and it's okay to* be *scared, that's part of being alive. But my fear does not rule me. I'm going to trust them.*

Later that night, Esera went to bed. The Galaxy was still dark and forbidding, its horrors and cruelty insurmountable to the one dumb girl who thought she could make a difference. But now, that dumb girl had two friends. And three was a lot more than one.

The Council watched Tarkin's broadcast in deathly silence. Obi-wan may have felt the most rotten among them, having *known* the two men flanking Tarkin were close before they made their escape.

"It it with great pleasure I welcome these two, brave, young men," said Tarkin, gesturing to Aspar and Caraf at his side. "They have turned their backs on the mysticism and obscurantism of the Jedi Order. They will bring all of the best elements of the Jedi–selflessness, courage, initiative, dedication–to the Grand Army of the Republic, with none of the ancient, stagnant dogma that has stifled the Order. It is my sincere hope these two will be the first of many to forsake their bonds to that dying religion and swear themselves the Republic directly. General Aspar, do you have anything you'd like to say?"

"I do, Chancellor, thank you." Aspar stepped up, and the holocamera droids focused on his 'face,' The bandages were gone, replaced by a simple, expressionless mask, a vague approximation of Humanity, his eyes the only hint something was alive under it. He wore a Jedi's hood and cloak, but now had the crisp grey uniform of an officer of the Grand Army beneath it. *He's even got a general's code cylinders,* Obi-wan noticed.

"My name is Ardabur Aspar. I was until recently a knight of the Jedi Order. I have been left scarred and deformed by my service to the Republic, fellow citizens. I do not regret it. I would suffer this pain a thousand times over again, if it meant upholding the democracy we have sworn to protect. Leaving the Jedi Order brings me no pleasure. I believe it was once a noble institution that was everything some still believe it is. But... times change.

"The tenure of Grand Master Yoda has been long. Perhaps too long. As the Chancellor said so aptly, the Order has become stagnant and stifled. It failed to prevent this war, and it has failed to end this war. It had neither the stomach to act with decisiveness to stop Dooku's Separatist movement nor to fight with the overwhelming might it could bring to bear against the rebels when they commenced hostilities.

"This willful surrender of the Republic's authority cannot be ignored any longer. Not by me, not by the Chancellor, not by the citizens of the Republic. If the Jedi Order cannot be trusted to fulfill its role in our Republic, then the Republic must find an alternative. My comrades and I are blessed with uncommon powers and skills, that can bring peace, hope, and salvation to this suffering Galaxy. What right do we have to sit by? What right do we have to do nothing with what we have been given? I believe we have a higher calling. To serve the greatest democracy this Galaxy has ever seen, as only we can. I know I am not alone among the Jedi. I call on those who still have their eyes open to join me. This is not treason- it is a reversion, to what we once were, and what we can be again. Free yourselves from a failed and outdated system. Join me, join the Chancellor, join the Republic! And let us bring an end to this destructive conflict, once and for all."

The broadcast cut, leaving nothing but a hologram of the emblem of the Republic hovering in its place. Master Yoda touched a button on his chair's control panel, shutting down the transmission. The masters of the Council looked to each other, and no one dared speak. It was Mace Windu who broke the silence:

"It's schism, then."

Author's note: Alright, it's not as early in May as I hoped, but to be fair, last week I had auto issues forced upon me with a buzz saw. I love having my stuff stolen by sociopath junkies so ivory tower elites can feel good about themselves for making our city more "progressive."

"Hold on, Timewatch, is that who I think it is?" I hear you ask. Yes, readers, that's him, the one and only Klaud in ASD. I'm salvaging one of the only good things from the Sequel Trilogy for my story. I've been trying to work Klaud into the story for a while now, so why not throw him on board? I'm sure having new crew on *Encounter* will be as weird for you readers as it is for Esera, but they won't be priority non-POV characters like Voyan and Zule, or even Khan, for that matter. Like all minor characters, I'll reintroduce them every now and then for the sake of your memory. We're off to Emberlene next, it should be fun! I'll see you there later this month or in early June. And as always, thanks to Corshy for beta-reading.

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